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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN BOMBERS LAND IN MARACAY

REF: CARACAS 1263

Classified By: Political Counselor Francisco Fernandez
for Reason 1.4 (d).

1. (SBU) Two Russian Tu-160 BLACKJACK supersonic bombers arrived in the early afternoon of September 10 at the Libertador airbase in Maracay, Venezuela. President Hugo Chavez revealed the arrival of the aircraft during a nation-wide broadcast inaugurating nine new medical clinics. Chavez was handed and read aloud a note announcing the arrival of the two strategic aircraft to conduct joint training with Venezuelan Su-30 FLANKERS. The surprise arrival of the BLACKJACKS is not related to the upcoming Venezuelan - Russian naval exercise and port visit later in the year (Reftel).

2. (SBU) A gloating Chavez told the opposition "I hope it hurts you pitianquis," adding that the arrival of the bombers represented a "deepening of the strategic relationship between Russian and Venezuela." (Note: Pitianqui is Chavez's new term of art for political opponents he considers U.S. lackeys. End Note.) Referring to the bombers in a broadcast later in the afternoon, Chavez claimed that he had turned to the Russians after the United States had refused to provide spare parts for an aging F-16 fleet and had removed Venezuelan access to radar technologies. Chavez also stated that Venezuela had invited the Russian Air Force to visit because it was a sovereign nation and had the right to have relationships with whatever country it chose. Mikhail Orlovets, Russia's ambassador to Venezuela, told local media that Russia had no desire to install military bases and that upcoming naval exercises were "routine." Chavez told reporters that he would be "driving" one of the bombers in the coming days.

3. (S) The Tu-160 BLACKJACK is a swing wing supersonic bomber similar in appearance to the U.S. 1980's vintage B-1 LANCER. The two aircraft sent to Venezuela were painted for public relations with the name of famous Russian pilots painted under the cockpit in huge red letters and the tail fin of the white jet was ablaze in Russian stripes and a large red star. The two bombers were preceded at Libertador airbase by an AN-124 CONDOR, a huge cargo plane similar to the C-5 GALAXY. The CONDOR probably carried a complete groundcrew, spare engines, avionics and machine shop to service the bombers. Estimating two hours of maintenance for every hour of flight time, and assuming no serious system failures, the jets will be ready to make their first flight the afternoon of September 11.

4. (C) Comment: The BLACKJACK bombers are a convenient distraction to keep Venezuelans' attention away from soaring

inflation, a lethal crime problem, worsening blackouts and an embarrassing criminal trial of a Venezuelan in Miami prior to state and local elections. Local analysts see this as an example of how Chavez will exploit international tensions (in this case Russia's desire to react to the US sending assistance via naval vessels to Georgia) to advance domestic political goals. Once again Chavez seems intent on provoking a confrontation with the "empire" in order to personalize the election into a referendum over his leadership and "defense of the revolution." End Comment.

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